Sat 26 April 1996
Shabbat Songs
Congregation Adat Reyim
Robert Berkowitz

Shabbat Songs

Imagine yourself living in Central or Eastern Europe during the 18th century. It is Friday evening. You, your spouse, your children, perhaps other close relatives or friends have just finished the Shabbat dinner, possibly the only meal of the week that was totally satisfying. You want to extend the Shabbat feeling a bit more before it begins to dissipate. What do you do?

What many families did, and what some traditional families today still do, is hold a family sing along. Enthusiasm was more important to the group than musical talent. The ability to keep time by pounding on the kitchen or dinning room table did come in handy.

The collection of songs sung at home during Shabbat, especially after dinner on Friday evening, is known as the Table Z'mirot (TZ). The first song of the TZ, the song that started the festivities, was the song with which we started our service, Shalom Aleichem (SA).

No one knows when, who, or where SA was written. It is quite old; estimates of the text's age vary from 300 years old[1] to more than 1000 years old.[2] It is based on the following folk tale found in the Talmud:[3]

> Rabbi Yose, son of Rabbi Yehudah, said: "Two angels accompany a man on the eve of Shabbos from the synagogue to his home, one good angel and one evil angel." When the person arrives home to find the lights burning, the table set, and the bed made, the good angel exclaims, "May it be God's will that it be so next Shabbos." But if this is not the case, if the house is dark and in disarray, the evil angel exclaims, "May it be God's will that it be so next Shabbos." The good angel is compelled to answer Amen.

Obviously we want to evoke the angel's best wishes, and that is what the song SA helps us do.

Since it is a TZ, SA was not sung in the synagogue. Although Siddurim as early as the 12th century have included TZ, until recently they were placed only in a section for home rituals and not found as part of the worship service.[4] Even today, many Siddurim, such as Siddur Sim Shalom, follow this precedence and do not include SA as part of the Friday night service. In 1967, a prayer book called Service of the Heart, published by the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues in London, placed SA as part of the Friday night service. As far as I can ascertain, this is the first prayer book to do so. The siddur we use on Friday nights, Likrat Shabbat, includes SA as part of the Friday night service on page 13-b. Rabbi Aft purposely asks that we turn to the home ritual section (page 10 of the blue pages) when we sing, attempting to remind us that SA originally was not sung in the synagogue.

The words of SA are repetitive simple Hebrew. After you have learned one verse, you know most of the words to the other verses as well. Over the centuries many melodies have been attached to the text. The melody we use here at Adat Reyim has become the standard melody throughout the United States. It was composed around 1920 by Rabbi Israel Goldfarb, who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

Another song that we sing early Friday evenings at Adat Reyim is Lecha Dodi (LD). It was composed circa 1540 by Rabbi Shlomo Halevy Alkabetz, one of Safed's many mystic residents. The inspiration for this song is a mystical passage of the Talmud:[5]

> Rabbi Chanina robed himself and stood at sunset on the eve of the Sabbath and exclaimed, "Come! Let us go forth to welcome the Sabbath Queen." Rabbi Yanai garbed himself in festive attire on Sabbath eve and exclaimed, "Come bride, Come bride."

This image of Shabbat as the bride and Israel as the bridegroom still manifests the affection that the Sabbath enjoys among the people. Those with mystical leanings felt it was more than a pleasing analogy, that it conveyed an ultimate truth concerning Israel and the seventh day.

The image inspired several songs on the same theme, some even with the same name.[6] Rabbi Alkabetz's song was the favorite of Rabbi Isaac Luria, and through his influence it became accepted as part of the standard service, overcoming some initial opposition to this liturgical addition.[7] It is one of the last piyyutim (medieval religious poems) to be incorporated into the service and is found in both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi rite.

As the sun set on Friday, Rabbi Luria and his disciples, dressed in white, would go out into the fields around Safed walking westward, singing LD to welcome the advent of the Sabbath. In commemoration of that practice, today at the recitation of the last stanza, worshippers traditionally stand and turn toward the

entrance to the sanctuary in order to welcome the entry of the Sabbath. While singing the last words ("boi kallah, boi kallah"), one bows at the waste as though one is formally greeting an honored guest.
Traditionally, mourners wait in the synagogue foyer until the end of LD. LD is a joyous song which was considered inappropriate for those recently bereaved to sing. Since all mourning is suspended with the start of Shabbat, which officially begins with the completion of LD,[8] mourners may participate in the rest of the joyous service with the others in the community. Shabbat officially not starting until LD is finished also allows musical instruments to accompany it and any prior songs, if desired.
The text is poetic Hebrew, which makes translation into another language difficult. An additional difficulty in making a faithful translation of the text from the Hebrew is that Rabbi Alkabetz arranged the composition so that the first letter of each stanza spells out his name; a practice that was common among liturgical poets of during his life time. Even so, LD has been translated into most European languages, Heinrich Heine making a translation into German.[9]
Each stanza consists of four parts, the first three of which have the same rhyming scheme and the fourth part which ends in the common syllable *la*. There are reference to or direct quotes from all three parts of the Tanakh, the Talmud, and the Midrash. The title itself is taken from Song of Songs, Chapter 7, verse 12.[10]
There are at least 2000 melodies which have been written to LD. Adat Reyim uses a melody written by Louis Lewandowski in the mid 19th century.

END NOTES

---

[1] Gates of Understanding, edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, CCAR and UAHC, 1977, page 210. Note number 294 dates it from the 17th century.

[2] Cantor Neil Schwartz in a 2 April 1996 email to me in response to a general query I placed concerning Shalom Aleichem on alt.music.jewish.

[3] Shabbat 119b.

[4] The Encyclopedia of Jewish Concepts by Philip Birnbaum, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1193, page 352, states that the Machzor Vitry (compiled around the late 11th century) contains Z'mirot for Sabbaths and festivals.

[5] Shabbat 119a and Baba Kamma 32a-32b.

[6] To Pray As a Jew - A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service, Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, BasicBooks, 1980.

[7] Jewish Liturgy - A Comprehensive History by Ismar Elbogen, translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin, Jewish Publication Society, 1993, page 92. Originally published in German, 1913.

[8] A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice by Rabbi Isaac Klein, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979, 1992, page 59.

[9] As Elbogen notes in endnote 5 to his discussion of LD on page 92, the fact that Heine misattributed the poem to Rabbi Judah Halevi reflects his high opinion of the work. It also shows he was ignorant of the acrostic within the work.

[10] Some further examples are Exodus 20:8, Deuteronomy 5:12, Shevuot 20b, Zechariah 14:9, Deuteronomy 28:18-19, Genesis Rabbah 1:2, Ruth 4:18, Genesis Rabbah 11:9. As Philip Birnbaum writes in his Encyclopedia of Jewish Concepts (op. cit.), there is scarcely a phrase in the entire hymn that cannot be traced to an older source.